

one of their main arguments against President Trump was that he mishandled the COVID-19 pandemic.

I know and you know that hindsight is 20/20. We know that the public health guidance provided by the CDC has evolved over time. We have learned a lot since then. But they were more interested in the blame game to advance their political cause in the runup to the November 3 election than they were in actually trying to help the very people who sent us here to represent them, and I think it is just shameful.

TERRORISM

On another matter, over the last 4 years, our country has made serious progress in the decades-long fight against terrorism and to lay the foundation for peace and stability in the Middle East.

We have virtually wiped out the ISIS caliphate, which was the most recent manifestation of this poisonous ideology embraced by al-Qaida that led to the attacks on 9/11. We have brought down high-ranking terrorists like al-Baghdadi, and we have eliminated the head of the Quds Force, the IRGC in Iran, that is the No. 1 state sponsor of terrorism in the world—Mr. Soleimani.

We have actually strengthened our relationship with allies in the region, like Israel and Jordan, and taken a tougher approach on a unified basis against enemies like Iran. And the recent Abraham Accords Peace Agreement marked a historic step in normalizing relations between Israel and the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain.

There is no question in my mind that the world is safer today than it was 4 years ago because of the historic progress that we have made, not only against terrorists but to provide the foundation of peace and stability in the Middle East by encouraging Israel and its neighbors to work together where they can.

But our job is not finished. Dangerous and destabilizing forces still remain, and America's military continues to play a vital role.

I personally appreciated General Mattis's doctrine of fighting terrorists by, with, and through our allies on the ground. That meant that we didn't need to put hundreds of thousands of American soldiers and marines, Special Forces on the ground. We could work through and with our allies, and that was largely successful at eliminating the ISIS threat in the Middle East.

So I was alarmed by Acting Secretary of Defense Christopher Miller's announcement today that without any real consultation either with our allies at NATO or elsewhere—certainly not with Congress—the Pentagon plans to withdraw troops from Afghanistan and Iraq to a potentially unstable and dangerous level.

I happen to be a member of the Senate Intelligence Committee, and one of the things our military does in forward-deployed locations like the Middle East is provide enabling and force

protection for our intelligence officers, who quietly work without any particular attention, hopefully. That is the nature of their work. But they need the military to be there to provide that force protection if they need it to enable their important work.

So a precipitous retreat, which would reverse the progress we have made and fought so hard to make, I think, is deeply troubling.

If we have learned one thing, it is about—maybe you call it the—I don't know if you call it the physics of military conflict or leadership, but history has taught us that power vacuums are not often filled by the good guys. It is the tyrants, it is the thugs, it is the dictators, it is the terrorists who fill those power vacuums, and if we mistakenly, even with the best of intentions, create a power vacuum, we could see once again the rise of ISIS like we saw with President Obama's premature withdrawal from Iraq.

We simply need to learn from our experience and not make the same mistake again. A precipitous withdrawal would not empower our allies. Indeed, we have heard from some of those allies. For example, NATO—the North Atlantic Treaty Organization—has a significant number of troops in these areas that are providing training and support for our friends on the ground.

It could well give rise to an opportunity for our adversaries—to the terrorists and insurgents who would love nothing more than to see American troops packing their bags so they could claim that they have defeated the Great Satan, as some of them have referred to it.

We would also, I think, cause our allies to question our reliability, while unintentionally, perhaps, emboldening our enemies and jeopardizing the lives of civilians in the region.

So I think we need to have a conversation here. We need to have a consultation. We need to get the military leaders before the appropriate committees in the Senate so that we can ask questions and understand the process and what the end goal is, particularly this close to the close of this administration's current term of office.

I understand the desire to bring our troops home. But in doing so, we can't undermine the gains that they and thousands of other brave Americans have made in the fight against terrorism and those who would do us harm.

E-CIGARETTES

Mr. President, on another matter, I have said here on the Senate floor many times over the last several months that COVID-19 is the most urgent threat facing our country right now. But as I just got through saying, it is not the only one.

Both here and abroad, the same threats and challenges that existed before COVID-19 are still with us and may have been exaggerated by the current crisis. I spoke about one example here on the Senate floor yesterday—

the strain on mental health resources. The stresses this virus are taking on our people—on the American people—are serious, as many cope with isolation, health anxieties, job losses, and financial struggles.

We are seeing a correlation with another health crisis that has been exacerbated by COVID-19. Last fall, one of the biggest health threats making headlines was the nationwide use of e-cigarettes by our young people. Folks of all ages were experiencing a range of mysterious medical conditions linked to these devices, with vaping-related injuries reported in all 50 States. What is most concerning to me is that most of those affected were otherwise healthy children and teens.

I met one of those teenagers in Fort Worth last December when I visited the University of North Texas Health Science Center for a roundtable discussion on the use of e-cigarettes. Sixteen-year-old Anna Carey was one of the many students at her high school who became addicted to e-cigarettes. She started to see symptoms that are uncommon for an otherwise healthy teenager. She was extremely lethargic and would experience random and severe pains in her chest.

Two initial x rays came back clear, so doctors released her, but she continued to struggle. Eventually, she was admitted to Cook Children's Hospital and diagnosed with chemical-induced pneumonia in both of her lungs.

Well, I am glad to report that Anna has now fully recovered and is using her story to encourage more teens not to go down the same path that she traveled down.

Now, with the additional public health concern of COVID-19, the need for action to prevent children and teens from using these devices could not be higher.

When it comes to the coronavirus, we know those who are older or who have underlying health conditions are most likely to experience severe cases. But there is a recent study by researchers at Stanford University School of Medicine that looked at the connection between vaping and COVID-19 among young people.

Researchers found that those who use e-cigarettes were five to seven more times likely to be diagnosed than nonusers. Dr. Bonnie Halpern-Felsher is a professor of pediatrics and the senior author of the study. She said: "Teens and young adults need to know that if you use e-cigarettes, you are likely at immediate risk of COVID-19 because you are damaging your lungs."

Now, one of the simplest and most effective ways to discourage children and teens from becoming addicted to these devices is to prevent them from even trying in the first place. But, unfortunately, our current laws make that easier said than done.

If you want to buy tobacco at a convenience store or gas station, you have to show an ID to prove you are over 18. So whether a teen is trying to buy e-